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THE OVER-REPRESENTATION OF HISPANICS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN NEW JERSEY

by

Alexandra Chey

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Psychology
College of Science and Mathematics
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in School Psychology
at
Rowan University
April 14, 2016

Thesis Chair: Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.

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Dedications

I dedicate this manuscript to my parents, Jose and Nilda; my brothers, Simon and Manny; my boyfriend Matthew Lichtenstein; and his parents, Stu and Liz, for their constant love and support.

Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge my thesis chair, Dr. Roberta Dihoff, for her constant support in the completion of this thesis.

Abstract

Alexandra Chey
THE OVER-REPRESENTATION OF HISPANICS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN NEW JERSEY
2015-2016
Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.
Master of Arts in School Psychology

The overrepresentation of Hispanics of Special Education programs has been a continuous debate for years. Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of minority students in special education programs is greater than in the school population as a whole. This study attempted to evaluate the causes and problems of the overrepresentation. There are a number of factors that could explain the disproportionality of this issue. This study identified multiple factors that shape this problem. One of the factors that could be influencing this issue is poverty and low socioeconomic status (SES). Therefore, this study compared the county with the lowest SES in New Jersey to the county with the highest SES, based on median household income. The richest county was identified as Hunterdon County compared to the poorest county, Cumberland County. This study compared the numbers from each of these counties. The percentages of minorities were computed in Special Education Programs based on the percentage attending school in each County as well as what percentage should be expected based on national figures. Literature on the history of the overrepresentation and factors contributing to the disproportionality in special education were explored.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the different factors that allow for Hispanics' access to special education programs in New Jersey. This study analyzed data from low income counties in comparison to high income counties to determine differences, as opposed to other races. While exploring previous studies and existing research, there seemed to be a sufficient amount of different information on both sides. Many researchers believed that Hispanics are under-represented, while others believed that they are over represented. The purpose of this study was to compare different counties in New Jersey by exploring the poorest county and looking at the richest county to determine the percentages of minorities in each. This study hypothesized that the percentage of minorities in Special Education programs in low SES and high SES counties will differ. Was there a higher rate of Hispanics in these programs in different areas of New Jersey, like urban areas vs. suburban areas? "Special Education programs are designed for those students who are mentally, physically, socially and/or emotionally delayed." ("What is Special Education," 2015). One limitation of this study was that the researcher used publicly available information and some of this information might have not been up to date. Another limitation was that some Hispanics whom actually might need to be in special education programs were not because their parent might disagree. Disproportionate representation in these programs means that the percentage of these groups in special education differs significantly from their percentage in the general school population.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The disproportionality of minorities in Special Education has been an ongoing and critical problem (Chung, Perez, & Skiba, 2008). This disproportionality can be operationally defined as the representation of a certain group that differs significantly from the representation of other groups in that category. There are a number of factors that have an impact of the overrepresentation of minorities in these programs. For example, minority children are often labeled as emotionally disturbed and intellectually disabled; these terms are not always suitable. Students are commonly labeled in ways which do not accurately describe the student, which is one of the main reasons why they are being put in these programs to begin with (Gentry, 2009).

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was an Act created to ensure that all students with disabilities were receiving the proper and adequate education, and that students were placed into an appropriate education program. This Act was meant for all children with disabilities to be seen as equal and receive the same education as others. Since the beginning of special education, minority students and children that live in poverty seem to have been the primary students receiving these services (Bower, 2009).

In 2005, a study by Salzman showed a large change in the English Language Learner student population. Due to the school age population increasing by almost 12 percent, the English Language Learner student population had dramatically increased by 54 percent, and sixty percent of the English Language Learners in the United States were Hispanic. Furthermore, Salzman (2005) stated that minority children were carrying around labels like “emotionally disturbed” and “intellectually disabled” that do not

accurately describe them. The article also stated that no one race should have a disproportion issue when it comes to the number of disabled children. These children were being diagnosed incorrectly and students were being placed in these programs because the educators were misinterpreting behavior problems and misunderstanding cultural differences (Salzman, 2005).

Throughout the United States, disabilities are more often misdiagnosed in minority children, and especially in boys (Salzman, 2005). The concern for misdiagnosing children in schools becomes more difficult and problematic when looking at children from diverse cultures. Many schools identify Hispanic children as gifted due to their behaviors that come from their culture. The reasons for misdiagnosing a child often has to do with language differences, cultural norm differences, and institutionalized racism (Castellano & Frazier, 2011). Federal data from 2007 showed evidence that Hispanic students represented just over 20 percent of the school population in the United States' school enrollment but almost 24% of the students were classified with learning disabilities (Rebora, 2011).

Lower Income Areas

James Vaznis (2012) studied whether low-income school districts are placing children in special education programs because of actual disabilities or because the programs were weak and causing the students to fall behind in class. Vaznis found that schools in low-income districts were more likely to place students in special education programs for mild and often questionable disabilities (2012). A number of demographic factors related to geographical location and socioeconomic status have been shown to

have an effect on student educational achievement or on early cognitive development prior to school entry (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2003).

Living in poverty puts children at a higher risk for falling behind with their academics. “High-risk environments, such as living in poverty, shift the entire curve of achievement to the left, so that there is an increase in the number of children with special needs at the lower end and a decrease in the number of high achievers who may be identified as gifted at the upper end” (Fernandez & O’Connor, 2016). A significant amount of evidence states that low SES is understood to affect the child’s life academically, and a number of studies showed that many minority families live in low SES areas; therefore, increased exposure to risk factors that compromise early development. According to Vazniz (2012), living in a low SES area made it more difficult for the child to have access to the right materials needed for class like notebooks and textbooks.

In 2006, Copeland, Qi, and Valenzuela prepared a study that examined one of the largest districts in the Southwestern. This district educated 27% of all public school students, with a total student population between 85,500 and 87,000. These numbers were fairly large in comparison to the rest of New Jersey. This specific district is known to be ethnically and linguistically diverse. In 2002, the authors broke down the numbers of students by race to see what the percentages looked like. The authors identified 37.8% to be White, 3.8% as African American, 50.5% as Hispanic, 4.7% as Native American, 1.9% as Asian/Pacific Islander and 1.2% as other ethnicity. Another thing noted about the district was that it was extremely high in poverty. There was a high percentage of students that received extra help like reduced price or free lunch and other beneficial

programs that the school provided for children in poverty (Copeland, Qi & Valenzuela, 2006). It is possible that a majority of the population in this area were minorities and that could be a primary reason as to why a majority of the district is in poverty.

The majority of current research shows that poverty has a significant effect on academics and is also tied to disability rates (Job & Zorigian, n.d.). A study by Bovaird, Ferguson, and Mueller (2007) examined the impact that poverty has on educational outcomes for children. They found that children from low-income families usually start school behind their peers who come from a higher class than they do, as shown in measures of school readiness. They also indicated that poverty decreases a child's readiness for school through many factors such as what the child's home life is like, the child's health, and the neighborhoods that they live in (Bovaird, Ferguson, & Mueller, 2007). They often do not require the skills that they need for school if they live in poverty and do not receive the social skills and stimulation.

Jiyeon Park, Ann P. Turnbull, and Rutherford Turnbull (2002), observed the impact that poverty had on children living in poverty with disabilities. "It is becoming increasingly evident that poverty has a compounding impact on the educational achievement of all children, including those with disabilities. Poverty is not a secondary topic in the field of special education, service delivery, and disability policy however, it is a challenge for educational systems to obtain results of productivity, accountability, independence, equal opportunity for all and diversity." (R. Enwefa, S. Enwefa, Jennings, 2006). Furthermore, MacMillian and Reschly (1998) studied poverty and believed that poverty lowers the quality of life for an individual, which can have a negative impact on his or her learning. Living in poverty can make it difficult for children to be successful

when it comes to school because they might not have access to a lot of the same resources as other students.

Inaccurate Placement

There are many researchers that were interested in studying the inaccurate placement of minority students in special education programs. A study that was done by Guiberson (2009), on this topic discussed various inaccurate placements that took place in these programs. In some cases, children were either overrepresented, underrepresented, or misidentified. Guiberson (2009) discussed different cases of each of these inaccuracies and described what they meant. For example, overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of minority students in special education programs is greater than the school population over all. Underrepresentation occurs when students that should be in these programs are not placed in the programs and do not receive the appropriate services that they need. Misidentification occurs when students are labeled with a different disability than the one that they have (Guiberson, 2009). Labeling students as disabled when they really are not disabled leads to unwarranted services and supports and also concerns for the child by their loved ones. Also, once students are placed into special education classrooms and receive special education services, they tend to remain in these classes (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

In 2015, *The New York Times* published an article called "Is Special Education Racist?". Paul L. Morgan and George Farks discussed their opinions on black and Hispanic children in special education programs. They stated that most children who received a diagnosis for a specific disorder did not participate in special education because they do not need to, meaning that they were most likely misidentified. Rebora

(2011) stated that there had been a big ongoing issue related to the overrepresentation of Hispanics. Specifically, due to the large number of minority students struggling in schools, many were being classified for special education even though they do not truly have a disability.

The discussion and question of the disproportionality of minorities has been an ongoing debate for years. Many minority students have obtained labels that do not accurately suit them; because of this, they are getting the wrong type of education (Gentry, 2009). This impacts not only the education system, but it has a large effect on both the family and the student. Labeling can affect the child's self-esteem and force them to believe that they have some sort of disability which can have a negative impact on the rest of their lives.

Studies show that minority students are 2.3 times more likely to be identified with a mild mental/intellectual disability than a Caucasian student (Dekker et al., 2002). To demonstrate this, Ford and Ivory (2015) stated that "Decades of research, that include the entire public school population, have demonstrated that special education has been used to segregate unwanted students, and Black and Hispanic students (mainly males) have often been vulnerable to systemic biases that result their overrepresentation in special education classes" There are multiple research studies indicating that that a child's race and ethnicity are significantly related to the probability that they will be inaccurately identified as disabled (National Research Council, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Hispanics are being placed into special education programs because educators misinterpret behavior problems and misunderstand cultural differences (Gentry, 2009).

Sanchez et al., (2010) found that a majority of teachers were often too quick to bring ELL students to Instructional Support Team (IST), assuming that ELL students who are struggling academically have a learning disability. Teachers were not aware of helpful strategies to help the ELL students academically in a classroom setting. Rather than teachers trying to find effective ways to help these ELL students who are struggling, they tried to classify those students at an early age. Many schools provide additional support services for students who are struggling, but some districts do not provide such services (Sanchez et al., 2010).

There is a book called *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education* by the Committee on Minority Representation in Special Education, which includes Suzanne Donovan and Christopher T. Cross. This book discussed different statistics and the different demographics and changes that have occurred over the years. According to the authors, "Two decades ago, fewer than 3 percent of students were identified with learning disabilities. That number approaches 6 percent of all students today." (Cross & Donovan, 2002). The book also discussed the different racial/ethnic groups and how students with learning disabilities in these groups accounted for both the largest number of students in special education and also the largest growth rate in special education placements. "If special education services provide genuine individualized instruction and accountability for student learning, we consider it as serious a concern when students who need those supports are passed over (false negatives) as when they are inappropriately identified (false positives) (Cross & Donovan, 2002). Cross and Donovan (2002) further stated that they considered it a problem if minority students who quality for special services are overlooked in the identification process.

Educators and Referrals

There are many questions that factor into why there are so many Hispanics in special education programs. For example, how are Hispanics getting into these programs? Are Hispanics being referred to these programs by a teacher or pediatrician? To answer these questions, Cross and Donovan (2002) stated that most children in special education programs are referred by their teachers. If a teacher identified potential problem behavior in a student, they then moved forward and took proper precautions and evaluated the student. When comparing groups of students who were referred by teachers, minority students have greater academic and behavior problems than others (Cross & Donovan, 2002).

Evidence showed that, even in the initial stages of the special education process, students were often treated differently based on their race (Skiba et al., 2003). In another study, students who were recently referred for special education evaluations within urban school areas were randomly selected (Gottlieb, Gottlieb, & Trongone, 1991). The authors found that teachers referred minority children more than non-minority children for special education programs. In addition, teachers tended to refer minority children for behavioral issues rather than academic issues (Gottlieb, Gottlieb, & Trongone, 1991).

Shippen, Curtis, and Miller (2009) conducted a study suggesting that general education teachers were not focused on the issue of overrepresentation. The authors asked special education teachers questions about this issue, and the responses were clear. When asked about the overrepresentation of minorities in special education, one participant replied by saying “It is what it is,” while other participants agreed (Shippen et

al., 2009, p. 231). It is crucial for school educators to be concerned with this issue, rather than just referring any student that has a red flag that comes their way.

A promising solution to decrease the amount of minority referrals is to educate our educators and have them become more knowledgeable about the underlying theories, approaches, and ideologies of the multicultural education process (Kea & Utley, 1998). "Once educators become familiar with various cultures and are able to distinguish between cultural norms and influencing factors such as poverty or environment, then realistic, high expectations can be set for all students" (Dekker et al., 2002,). Educators need to have an idea and an understanding of other cultural backgrounds and the differences between them. Without this knowledge, the students are being inaccurately placed into programs they should not be in. Another way to decrease the amount of referrals for minorities is to build upon their strengths (Warger & Burnette, 2000). For example, minority students should be aware that they are capable of learning the material and getting the work done.

It is important for educators to develop culturally relevant instruction in order for minority students to be successful. Ford (2012) stated that becoming culturally competent is extremely important at this point in time. Building relationships with students outside of the classroom can be beneficial to educators because it shows the students that they are valued. "Additionally, a teacher must reflect on their assumptions about race and culture to ensure that those views are not impacting the curriculum or their discipline. Educators need to develop patience for students who are not yet proficient in English instead of becoming frustrated because they hold a belief that English should be the only language spoken in schools." (Kreskow, 2013).

DISTAR was a school program that was helpful to minorities. It focused on small groups and used direct instruction and followed sequenced lessons in certain subjects like English Language Arts and math. Kreskow (2013) stated that when this program was used in a classroom, that classroom had fewer referred special education students. Lending further support, Maheady et al., (1983) found that when this model was in effect in schools, there was a huge difference seen in the reading levels of minority students – they rose to either grade level or even above grade level. This goes to show that it is important for teachers to find effective ways of teaching students of all different cultures.

It is also necessary to address the dropout rates for minority students. As portrayed by Inserra and Fernandez (2013), this is important due to the following:

> "The dropout rates for English language learners are between 15-20% higher than the overall number of non-English language learners. This lack of academic success is also the cause for referrals of English language learners to special education, which does not increase the rate of ELLs who graduate."

Artiles and Ortiz (2002) also stated that students who were English language learners with very little language support were most likely to be referred to special education and were less likely to graduate and receive a high school diploma. This makes it very difficult for minorities who come to this country, do not know any English, and are not on the same academic level as the other students.

Often, many of the referrals to special education result in students who might need other academic support. For example, an aid in a classroom or an extended amount of time on certain assignments may be necessary. Due to the disproportionate percentage of ELL students in special education, it is now prohibiting these students from receiving

the more appropriate services they need in order to academically progress (Collier, 1999; Samson & Lesaux, 1999).

Overrepresentation could be increased by the lack of understanding that teachers have to students of different cultures or students that do not speak English perfectly yet. Another potential issue is that often times, mainstream educators lack the understanding of second language acquisitions, which can have an influence on the number of referrals of ELL students to special education classes (Cummins, 1997; McGlothlin, 1997; Krashen, 1981). It is extremely difficult for students to learn a whole new language and be able to integrate it in the classroom. Sometimes, teachers do not understand this difficulty and it appears as a sign of delay in the students.

According to some researchers, teachers are not being trained well enough, teachers are not getting the proper training, Response to Intervention plans are inconsistent, and the best practices necessary when working with ELLs are lacking (Hawkins, 2008; Karabenick, 2004). It is possible that this is largely the reason for the high percentage growth of ELLs receiving an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Also, it is difficult for educators to determine whether an ELL student has a language disability or if a student has a language deficit. Inserra & Fernandez (2013) prepared a study where they surveyed multiple teachers and students and found that teachers had very little background knowledge of their students. The teachers in the study described ELL students as students who were struggling academically as having attention difficulties and learning disabilities. Furthermore, the authors found that teachers lacked "training or background knowledge about the differences between social language and academic language to help them understand how students who are not acculturated may

exhibit attention deficits and have trouble retaining and understanding content." (Inserra & Fernandez, 2013). Many of these teachers were not sure when their students came to the country or even if they were born in country.

To fully acquire academic language can take between five and seven years. Additionally, for ELL students to acquire academic language when they were not proficient in their native language, fully acquiring academic language can take up to seven or ten years (Cummins, 1984). In this case, most ELL students were referred sooner than seven years and – in some cases – it was found that students were being referred within the first year of school (Collier, 2004).

Hispanics Have a Disadvantage

In many cases, Hispanics in the United States have difficulty when it comes to education. Many Hispanic students started out school without any economic or social resources, which put them at a disadvantage from the start. For Hispanic children, disadvantages usually stem from their parents because in many cases, the parents were immigrants and were new to the United States. Many parents also lacked knowledge about the United States' educational system. As Hispanic children advanced in school, inadequate school resources and weak relationships with teachers continued to undermine children's academic success (Martinez, Ownes & Schhneider, 2006). With Hispanics having a difficult time starting out school, this led to teachers believing that they had a learning disability, which subsequently led to these children being placed in special education programs.

Another disadvantage to Hispanic students is the implications of the rising minority population in public schools. The Hispanic public school population has nearly

doubled between 1987 and 2007, increasing from 11 to 21 percent (Gandara, 2010). Gandara (2010) stated that Hispanics were known as the largest minority group in the United States and also the fastest growing segment of the school population. Gandara also stated that Hispanics were the least educated of all major ethnic groups and had the least access to preschool education (2010). Preschool education could be beneficial for young Hispanics because it may give them a head start and an idea of what school in the United States will be like. It is highly likely that Hispanic students will come from a home with parents who speak little to no English This has the potential to be a huge disadvantage for Hispanic children because – as stated previously – teachers can view this as a developmental delay.

Hispanics were also more likely to attend schools that were hyper-segregated (Gandara, 2010). In this instance, hyper-segregated meant that Hispanic students would lack access to peers from the mainstream American culture, which could also be a disadvantage to them. In an article written by a mother who was a minority, she stated her opinion on school systems and how they dealt with special education programs. Jasmine Lavine stated that many teachers were allowed to use special education as a way to remove a child from a normal classroom setting solely because the child was perceived as "troubled" (2010).

An additional disadvantage for Hispanics is regarding standardized testing. "The problem with standardized tests and IQ tests is that they 'rely heavily upon the values and experiences of the white, middle-class culture and, therefore, discriminate against persons from differing cultural backgrounds'" (Maheady, Town, Algozzine, Mercer, &Ysseldyke, 1983, p. 449). In response to their findings, Maheady et al. attempted to develop new

standardized tests that were supposed to be fair (1983). This included culture-fair and culture-free tests that used adaptive behavior scales along with the tests and they interpreted the results using local group norms. Despite the authors' attempt to create fair tests for minorities, the overrepresentation of these students in special education programs did not decrease.

Disproportionate Representation

The concern about the overrepresentation of Hispanics in special education programs has been an issue for many years, but the controversy has been present for more than three decades (cite). A specific concern has existed surrounding the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education programs. Throughout past twelve years, surveys have been conducted by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of the United States Department of Education. Results from these surveys have highlighted the overrepresentation of minority children in special education programs. An additional study showed that approximately 13.5 percent of students in grades K-12 received special education services ("An NEA Policy Brief," n.d.).

It is necessary to fully understand the diverse cultures that exist. According to Kreskow (2013), "The theory of Culture as Disability focuses on the fact that disability is not always directly related to the individual but instead the dominant culture in power." Specifically, this is referring to the fact that there are certain norms in each culture, and if an individual does not meet those norms, they are then seen as disabled and have that label. Individuals are led to believe that there is only one right way to be in a culture. Due to this, those individuals that are different from the "norm" are looked at differently and are mislabeled (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). For example, if a student in school is not

acting or performing like his or her peers in school, it is possible that this student may automatically be looked at as being different. This can lead to the student being tested for placement in a special education program. “The problem that arises is that the teacher may simply be misinterpreting the culture of the child or may be lacking an effective delivery of instruction, which is why the child is struggling” (Kreskow, 2013).

Students of color tend to be overrepresented in the disability categories of mental retardation and emotional disturbances. Disproportionate representation of minorities in learning disabilities has also been reported, along with a high overrepresentation of minorities in special education categories like intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. Studies showed that minority students were 2.3 times more likely to be identified with a mild mental disability than a Caucasian student (Agbenyega & Jigets, 1999). Unlike the overrepresentation in that category, there seemed to be an underrepresentation of minorities in gifted education programs (Gentry & Yoon, 2009). Lloyd Dunn was one of the first to document the issue of disproportionate representation of minorities in classes for students with mental retardation/intellectual disabilities in 1968. If more students are identified as disabled and are given special education services when compared to the proportional percentage within the general population, then they are considered overrepresented. This is demonstrated by Hosp (1982), who stated the following:

> “The basic premise of disproportionate representation is that, all other things being similar, students from different groups should be identified for special education services in similar proportions. For example, if 6% of the Caucasian students in a given district are identified for special

> education, we would expect about 6% of the African-American students, 6% of the Latino/a students, and 6% of any other group to be identified."

It appears that these patterns of disproportionality have been a major concern not only to parents and school districts across the country, but also to researchers. However, further research must be done to adequately address these issues of disproportionality.

In 2004, The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) specified that states must monitor disproportionate representation by race or ethnicity in disability categories and special education placements while also requiring the review of local policies, practices, and procedures when disproportionate representation is found (Gentry & Yoon, 2009). Disproportionality in special education may be impacted from a combination of forces both within and outside of the educational system (Skiba et al., 2008). The IDEA stated that all tests used for the determination of eligibility for special education services were to be nondiscriminatory, demonstrating that the overrepresentation of minorities is not only an issue to multiple people, but that this overrepresentation of minorities was also a legal issue (Dekker et al., 2002).

Chapter Three

Methods

This study hypothesized that the percentage of minorities in Special Education programs in low SES and high SES counties will differ. The variables used for this study included county, race and median income. Further research will examine the differences in race based on median income and county. The researcher will look to explain the different factors that aid in disproportionality.

Sample

The participants used in this study were all special education students from two different counties in New Jersey found on www.nj.gov. One county was the poorest county and the other richest county based on median income. The richest was Hunterdon and the poorest was Cumberland County. This study focused on identifying different ethnic groups in special education programs. It compared the numbers of Hispanics classified in each county to African American's and Caucasians.

According to the State of New Jersey Department of Education, the total number of students enrolled in school in Cumberland County was 26,939. The number of Hispanics classified in Cumberland County was 11,372, and the number of African Americans and Caucasians were 6,121 and 8,522, respectively. The total number of students enrolled in school in Hunterdon County was 19,999. In this county, the number of Hispanics was 1,463, the number of African Americans was 499, and the number of Caucasians was 17,332.

Instrumentation

The instrument that was utilized to collect data was all of the publicly available information through the State of New Jersey Department of Education. The total number of Hispanic, African American and Caucasian students enrolled in school and the number of them enrolled in Special Education Programs in each county was also found through publicly available records from the State of New Jersey Department of Education. This source broke down the numbers by age, race, county, and gender. It also showed how many students were enrolled in Special Education Programs by county.

Procedure

Publicly available information was used as the source of data for this study. Research was gathered from each county using both public school and state records. The numbers were then computed into percentages, categorized by ethnic group. Each individual group was then compared to one another. The National figures were also publicly available in percentages by ethnic group.

Statistical Analysis

A chi-square was used to determine whether or not the results of this study were significant. A chi-square was used to compare actual numbers and percentages in order to find a relationship, and also to determine the expected value of students enrolled in Special Education programs for each county compared to national percentages.

Chapter Four

Results

Hunterdon county was the richest county in New Jersey based on median income. Based on Index Mundi (2013) the median income for the county was $105,880. Based on median income, Cumberland County was identified as the poorest county with a median income of $59,560. This study explored each county and found the number of students of each race enrolled in school in each of the counties. The total number of African Americans enrolled in schools in Cumberland County was 6,121 students, with 1,203 students being in a Special Education program. The total number of African Americans enrolled in school in Hunterdon County was 499 students, with 49 students being in a Special Education program. The total number of Caucasian students enrolled in school in Cumberland County was 8,522 students, with 1,521 students being in a Special Education program. The total number of Caucasian students enrolled in Hunterdon County was 17,332 students, with 2,876 students being in a Special Education program. The number of Hispanics enrolled in school in Cumberland County was 11,372 students, with 1,659 students being in a Special Education program. The number of Hispanics enrolled in Hunterdon County schools was 1,463 students, with 199 students being in a Special Education program. All of these figures were publicly available and were obtained from the state of New Jersey Department of Education. In *Figure 1*. The total number of students enrolled in schools was compared by county.

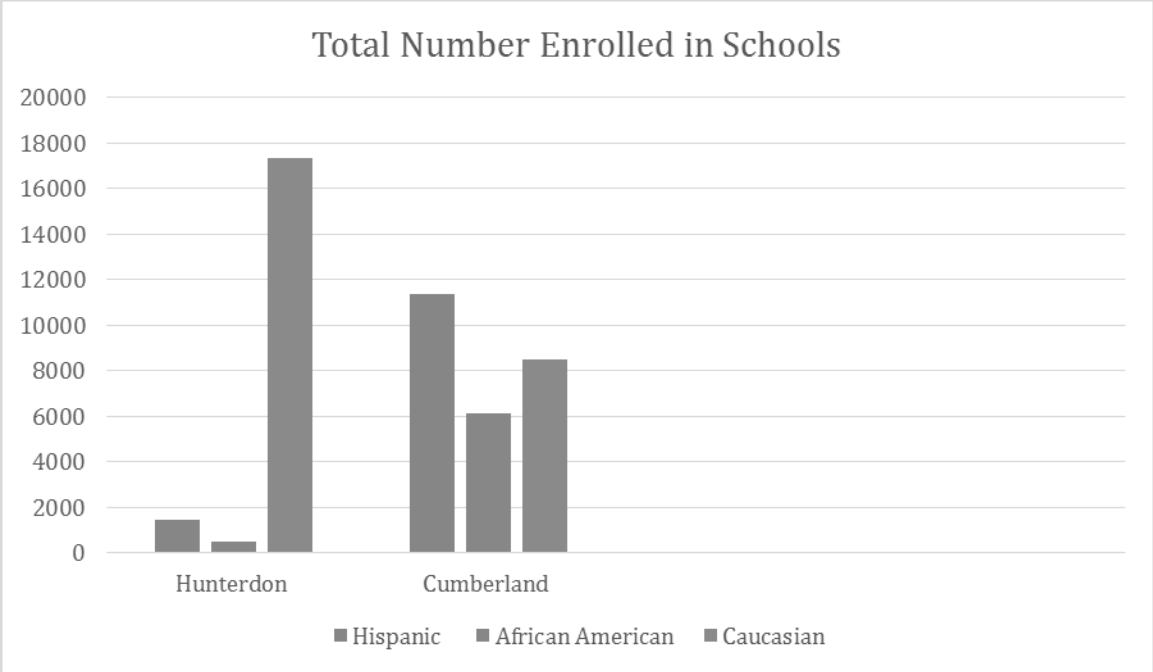

Figure 1. Total number enrolled in schools

After looking into both counties (Hunterdon and Cumberland), different races were compared to the Hispanic race. This study specifically examined the overall number of Hispanics, African Americans, and Caucasians enrolled in school in both of the counties. After finding the total number of students enrolled in school in each county, the number of each ethnic group that was classified was then examined. The numbers were converted into percentages and then plugged into a chi-square. The chi-square indicated that the results were not significant and that Hispanics were not overrepresented when compared to other ethnic groups in these counties. The number of students classified from each county is illustrated in *Figure 2.*, Numbers enrolled in Special Education.

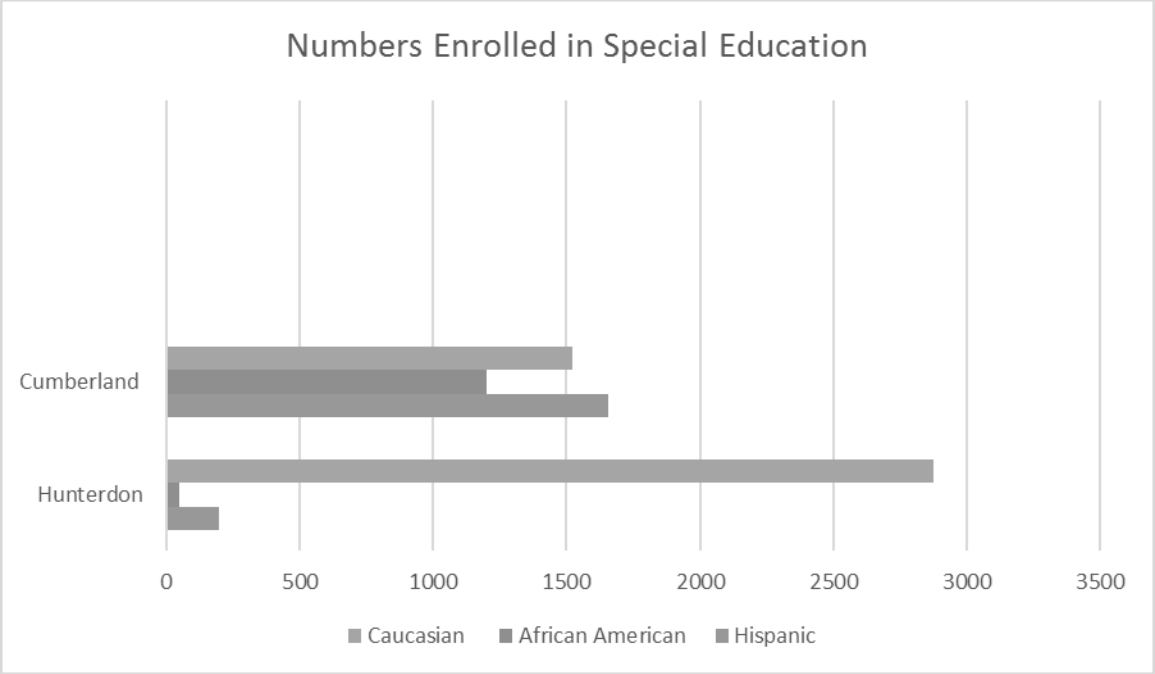

Figure 2. Numbers enrolled in special education

When looking into the expected values, the percentages of each ethnic group for each county were computed. In Hunterdon County, African American was 9.8%, Caucasian was 16.5%, and Hispanic was 13.6%. In Cumberland County, African American was 19.65%, Caucasian was 17.84%, and Hispanic was 14.5%. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) indicated that 15% African American, 13% Caucasian, and 12% Hispanics were expected. After comparing the different expectancies, however, the results from the chi-square indicated that there was no relationship between the counties and the national figure expectancies, meaning there was no association and that the expectancies were different, (X^2 [4]; df = 2.25; p = .6899).

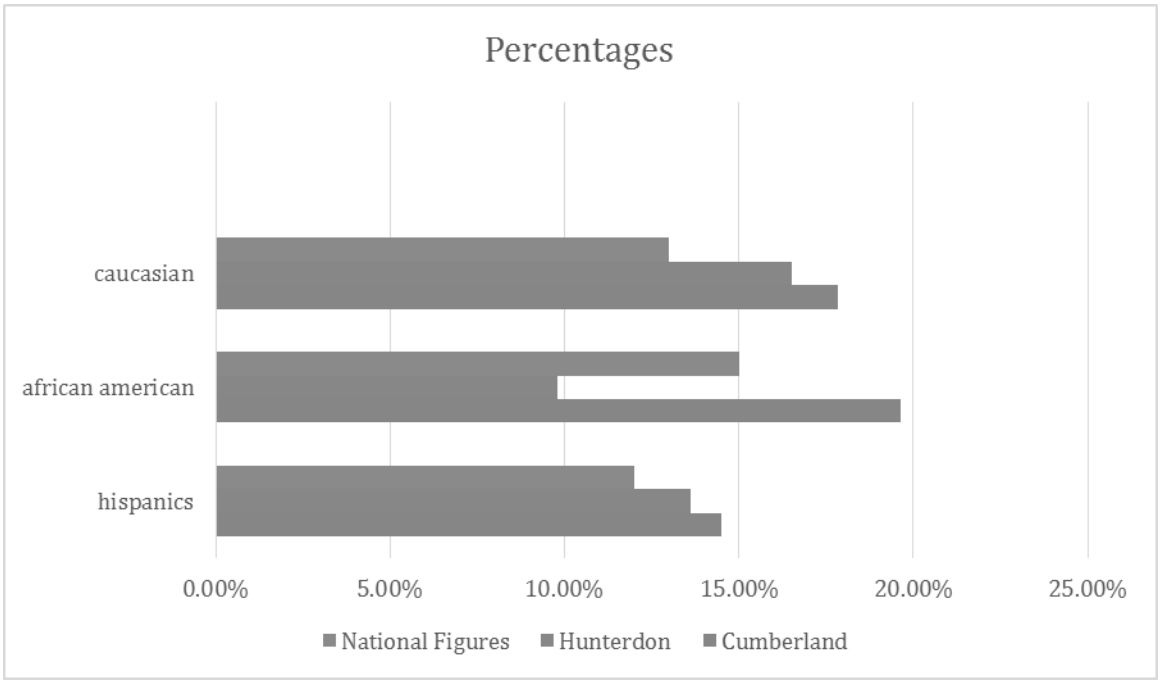

Figure 3. Percentages

In *Figure 3.*, Percentages, each county was compared to the national figures. These results were not significant and indicated that Hispanics were not overrepresented in special education programs in these New Jersey counties, as opposed to African American's and Caucasians. After comparing the expectancies, the results indicated that there was no relationship or association between the counties' expectancies and the national figures' expectancies.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Limitations

Like all research studies, limitations exist in this study. The first limitation for this study was that this study depended on data acquired by means of public information. Although access to this information was fairly simple for the researcher, public information has some flaws in its validity. For example, this public information could be out of date or missing important components, which may hinder the validity of the public data. Furthermore, it is unknown to the researcher exactly how the data which is public information was originally gathered. Similar to this first limitation, another limitation to this study was depending on public information that did not supply everything. The process to gather data could have been cold and rote, thus leaving out parts of a population which should have been included.

A limitation for this study may also exist because of the variables included (i.e. race, SES, median household income). However, the variables were chosen and calculated based on what was available in the public data. Finally, the findings of this study may be limited due to the fact that only two counties in the state of New Jersey were studied. While the two counties studied were found to be the highest and lowest SES areas in the state, the results are not generalizable to the state.

Some of the Hispanic, African American, or Caucasian populations could be in need of special education programs, but factors may prevent the student from having special education. An example of this is that parents may disagree with a suggestion from the school, keeping the student out of the program, which may have an effect on the data.

These unaccounted students were therefore unknown and undocumented in this present study. The literature suggests that quite often, children are put into special education programs and receive treatment that they do not necessarily need, due to factors such as language barriers and/or the lack of knowledge the educator might have on a student's culture (Guiberson, 2009). This could also have an impact and be a limitation when gathering the data.

The findings from this study were not found to be significant. However, it should be noted that the compared information did show a difference from the national figures. These figures may differ because there was one from a rich SES and one from a poor SES, which may have had an effect on why there was a difference between these and the national figures.

Summary

The current study examined Hispanics in special education programs in Hunterdon County and Cumberland County in response to a continuous debate on whether minorities are over- or under-represented in schools. To determine whether Hispanics were overrepresented, the study analyzed the total number of Hispanics, African Americans and Caucasians and also the number of each that were classified in a special education program. The study expected to find overrepresentation of Hispanics compared to the other ethnic groups; however, as a result of the statistics being computed in a chi-square, it was determined that the results were not significant. The present study also explored the expected values based on a normal curve. After computing the percentages of each ethnic group from each county and comparing them to the national

figures, a chi-square indicated that there was no relationship between the counties percentages and the national figures expectancies.

As discussed, the disproportionate representation of minorities has been a controversial issue in the field of special education for decades. There are multiple factors that could be said to have an impact on disproportionate representation. The literature suggests that educators are not educating themselves enough on other culture backgrounds, which can lead to the inaccurate placement of a student in special education (Shippen et al., 2009). Although the results of this current study were not significant, the literature states that inappropriate placement does exist and is an issue. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the inappropriate placement into special education programs that can lead to negative outcomes for the student and his or her family.

Based on the existing literature, minorities living in poverty are at a higher risk for being referred to special education programs (Vaznis, 2012). A reasonable assumption as to why the numbers from Cumberland County differed from Hunterdon County could be due to income. Minorities are more likely to live in Cumberland County than Hunterdon County; the literature states that a high percentage of minorities live in poverty, and initial exploration for this study determined that Cumberland was the poorest county in New Jersey based on median income. Although the study's results were not significant, the representations of the populations were interesting to compare. This study still supplied interesting and thoughtful insight into populations from different SES backgrounds and shed light on the disparity that is present in special education programs in New Jersey schools.

Future Direction

The research for this study presents a useful foundation for future studies to expand on this issue. Further research is necessary to better understand the issue of overrepresentation of minorities in New Jersey's school systems. Due to the existence of the question about minorities being either overrepresented or underrepresented, this is an area of research that calls for further evaluation.

Future researchers should keep in mind that the exact way in which the public information is gathered is unknown, and represented populations are therefore more likely to be underrepresented in some of the presented information. An important point to consider for future studies would be to increase the sample size to include more counties, which may aid in obtaining significant results. In doing so, future researchers may have the ability to generalize findings.

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